

Lessons From Colombia For Curtailing The Boko Haram Insurgency In Nigeria

BY AFEIKHENA JEROME

Nigeria is a highly complex and ethnically diverse country, with over 400 ethnic groups. This diversity is played out in the way the country is bifurcated along the lines of religion, language, culture, ethnicity and regional identity. The population of about 178.5 million people in 2014 is made up of Christians and Muslims in equal measures of about 50 percent each, but including many who embrace traditional religions as well.

The country has continued to experience serious and violent ethno-communal conflicts since independence in 1960, including the bloody and deadly thirty month fratricidal Civil War (also known as the Nigerian-Biafran war, 1967-70) when the eastern region of Biafra declared its secession and which claimed more than one million lives. The most prominent of these conflicts recently pitch Muslims against Christians in a dangerous convergence of religion, ethnicity and politics. The first and most dramatic eruption in a series of recent religious disturbances was the Maitatsine uprising in Kano in December 1980, in which about 4,177 died.

While the exact number of conflicts in Nigeria is unknown, because of a lack of reliable statistical data, it is estimated that about 40 percent of all conflicts have taken place since the country's return to civilian rule in 1999.¹ The increasing wave of violent conflicts across Nigeria under the current democratic regime is no doubt partly a direct consequence of the activities of ethno-communal groups seeking self-determination in their "homelands," and of their surrogate ethnic militias that have assumed prominence since the last quarter of 2000. Their grievances have typically found expression in bitter political complaints, sectarian crises stoked by political elites and incendiary media rhetoric, and violent insurgencies.

The latest among these violent and decimating sectarian grievances is the Boko Haram insurgency. Boko Haram, a violent but diffuse Islamist sect, has grown increasingly active and deadly in its attacks against state and civilian targets in recent years. It feeds on a narrative of historically

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deep-rooted resentment against, and vengeance for state abuses in order to recruit members and sympathizers. With increasing regularity since 2009, the sect has attacked Nigeria's police and military, rival clerics, politicians, schools, religious buildings, public institutions, and civilians. The brutal insurgent activities of Boko Haram have included the bombing of the national police headquarters in June 2011; a suicide attack on a United Nations building in Abuja in August 2011; the destruction of the Air Force Base in Maiduguri in December 2013; and innumerable other repeated attacks that have killed dozens of students, burnt and devastated villages, and destroyed infrastructure. Their grievances against the police are particularly deep-seated as many of their followers are locked up in police cells, and their late leader, Mohammad Yusuf, was killed in police custody in 2009.

Boko Haram's April 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok has attracted extensive international attention, thanks to the on-going global mobilization in this regard by the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign.

An ocean away, Colombia has come a long way in its half-century fight against insurgency, drug trafficking, kidnapping, and murder. The country entered the 21st century on the brink of becoming a failed state. By 2000, the Government of Colombia no longer had a monopoly on the exercise of authority in a considerable area of Colombian territory, where guerrillas and drug traffickers ruled instead. After decades of bloody conflict, Colombia has begun in recent years to make unprecedented strides in its war against insurgency. The strength of the major insurgency group, the 50-year-old Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), once considered the best-funded insurgency in the world, is at

its most vulnerable state in decades. The numerical strength of FARC declined between 2002 and 2010 from 16,000 fighters to 8,000, and 967 municipalities representing 88 percent of the country registered no terrorist attacks from FARC or other insurgent groups in 2013. Kidnappings have dropped by more than 90 percent since 2002, and the country has been able to rein in narcotics trafficking to some extent. There are other successes too: in October 2012, the authorities began peace talks with FARC, which, if eventually successful, will put an end to one of the world's longest conflicts; trade and the GDP are up; Medellín, the nation's second-largest city, is lauded as the "most innovative city in the world;" and Colombia is popping up on tourist "top 10" lists everywhere. The country also even made the final round at the 2014 Soccer World Cup.

This study investigates the useful lessons from Colombia's experience in dealing with insurgency, especially with FARC, for Nigeria's on-going strategy to curtail the Boko Haram insurgency, based on field study conducted in the summer of 2014.

The Evolution of Boko Haram

The beginnings of the insurgent activities of Boko Haram – often translated as "Western education is forbidden" or, using its Arabic name *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad)– in Nigeria date back to the early 2000s. It emerged as a small, radical Sunni Islamic sect in the 1990s that worshipped at the al-Haji Muhammadu Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri, capital of Borno State. The group advocated a strict interpretation and implementation of Islamic law for Nigeria. Its leader, Mohammed

Yusuf, was a charismatic and popular Qur'anic scholar who not only proselytized widely throughout northern Nigeria but also assisted in the implementation of Sharia (Islamic law) in several northern states in the early 2000s. The failure to achieve the expected full implementation of Sharia in northern Nigeria helps explain some of the deep-rooted resentment and anger of a considerable number of Muslim youths at what they perceived as the government's "deception" and "insincerity." This resentment fueled their call for an authentic Islamist revolution.²

While the sect's leadership did not initially engage in violence, its followers were involved in periodic skirmishes with police during its formative years.³ At that time, the group's activities were limited in scope and were contained within several highly impoverished states in the predominately Muslim North.

In 2003, Yusuf fled to Saudi Arabia, ostensibly to study, but in reality to escape arrest after the police had declared him wanted following incessant attacks and the burning down of some police stations by a more radical splinter group of about 200 members led by Abubakar Shekau and Aminu Tashen-Ilimi. This group had split from the mainstream movement in 2012 and settled in neighbouring Yobe State. Then Borno state deputy governor, Adamu Dibal, reportedly met Yusuf while on Hajj and used contacts with the security agencies to obtain permission for him to return to Maiduguri.

Yusuf rose to much greater prominence when he reportedly formed an alliance with Ali Modu Sheriff, a politician and wealthy businessman who became Governor of Borno State. Yusuf allegedly promised to deploy his influence and religious authority to provide

political support for Sheriff if, upon becoming Governor, Sheriff would implement Sharia.

In fulfilment of this agreement, the state government allegedly provided funds to Yusuf through Buji Foi, a disciple of Yusuf whom Sheriff made religious affairs commissioner when he became Governor in 2003. Yusuf used the money to organize an informal micro-credit scheme that gave his disciples capital to set up businesses. They in turn gave part of their profits as alms to the group, which began amassing arms, mostly Kalashnikovs from neighbouring Chad.

Cracks appeared in the purported Yusuf-Sheriff alliance, however, after the latter reneged on his promise to implement Sharia fully in the state. Yusuf began to direct sermons against Sheriff and his government, ultimately branding him an apostate. In 2007, Buji Foi resigned as religious affairs commissioner in protest.

The year 2009 marked a turning point in Boko Haram's transformation. In July 2009 at least 700 people were killed during an attempt by Nigerian security forces to suppress the group. In the aftermath of the attempt, their leader, Mohammed Yusuf, was killed in police custody. The group subsequently appeared to dissipate, but re-emerged a year later under new leadership. It orchestrated a large prison break in September 2010 that freed hundreds, including many of its members. Some Boko Haram militants may have fled to insurgent training camps in the Sahel in 2009-2010. The group has built ties with transnational extremist groups in the region, which have reportedly provided Boko Haram with insurgency training and increasingly sophisticated weaponry. Since 2011 Boko Haram attacks have featured improvised explosive devices (IEDs), car bombs, and, periodically, suicide attacks, but

fighters also continue to inflict a heavy toll using small arms and arson.

Boko Haram is not a monolithic organization.⁴ It has several splinter groups, some of which have formed alliances with foreign Islamist groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Shabaab in Somalia, which have helped in bringing about the radicalization of its leadership. The number of Boko Haram fighters is estimated in the hundreds to low thousands and its organizational structure is often described as diffuse, and increasingly so since the death of Yusuf.

Boko Haram's attacks have increased substantially in frequency, reach, and lethality since 2010, occurring almost daily in parts of northeast Nigeria, and periodically beyond. Their attacks were directed initially and primarily against state and federal targets, such as police stations, but they have also targeted civilians in schools, churches, mosques, markets, bars, and villages. Cell phone towers and media outlets have also been attacked, for both tactical and ideological reasons. The group has assassinated local political leaders and moderate Muslim clerics. Its deadliest attacks include a coordinated series of bombings in Kano, northern Nigeria's largest city that killed more than 180 people in January 2012; an attack on the village of Benisheikh in September 2013 that killed more than 160 civilians; and an assault on another northeastern village, Gamboru, that may have killed more than 300 people in early May 2014.

Since July 2014 the Boko Haram insurgency has entered a dangerous new phase in which the insurgents are beginning to operate like a conventional army. In Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states the insurgents are now aggressively challenging the Nigerian military through direct confrontation in open and

sustained battle. They are reported to be using armored vehicles, including tanks and heavy weapons, some stolen from the demoralized Nigerian army.

Boko Haram has erected flags over the towns it has invaded, forcing any remaining residents to follow its strict version of sharia or be killed in what appears to be an imitation of the caliphate proclaimed in parts of Iraq and Syria by the Islamic State.

More than 5,000 people are estimated to have been killed in Boko Haram-related violence since 2009, including at least 2,000 in the first half of 2014, making Boko Haram one of the deadliest terrorist groups in the world. Borno State has largely borne the brunt: it accounts for 3,136 deaths between 2006 and 2013, as shown in figure 1, followed by Yobe and Adamawa respectively. United Nations and Nigerian officials report that more than six million Nigerians have been affected by the conflict between Boko Haram and Nigerian state authorities. By another account, more than 650,000 people had fled the conflict zone by August 2014, an increase of 200,000 since May 2014. Nigeria's heavy-handed response to Boko Haram's insurgent and terrorist operations has also taken a toll on civilians.

Responses to the Insurgency: Military

The Nigerian Armed Forces has 130,000 active frontline personnel and 32,000 reserve personnel, ranking it 47th in the world in terms of conventional potential strength.⁶ It is reputed to be well-versed in counterinsurgency due to its wealth of experience in operating in insurgency environments such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and the recent operations in Mali, as well as successive participation in both the United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU) led

peacekeeping operations across the world. Since the Congo crisis in 1960, Nigeria has contributed both military and police personnel to more than 40 peacekeeping operations worldwide. By June 2013, about 5,000 officers and men of the Nigerian Armed Forces were serving in nine UN Peacekeeping missions within and outside Africa.

Nigeria’s major response to the insurgency since 2010 has been the deployment of its Joint Task Force (JTF), consisting of the Army, Air Force, Navy, State Security Services, and Police under unified command structures. It encourages increased intelligence-sharing, force

coordination and unity of direction, which are considered essential for any counterinsurgency operation, although this has been limited. The Nigerian parliament passed anti-terrorism legislation, originally introduced in 2011, in 2013. The law was designed, in part, to facilitate greater counterterrorism coordination, but interagency cooperation and information sharing remains limited by Nigeria’s federal structure, which has caused confusion between chief state security officers and federally-controlled security forces.

Nigerian JTF counterinsurgency operations in the northeast have been “generally repressive,” relying heavily on military-led

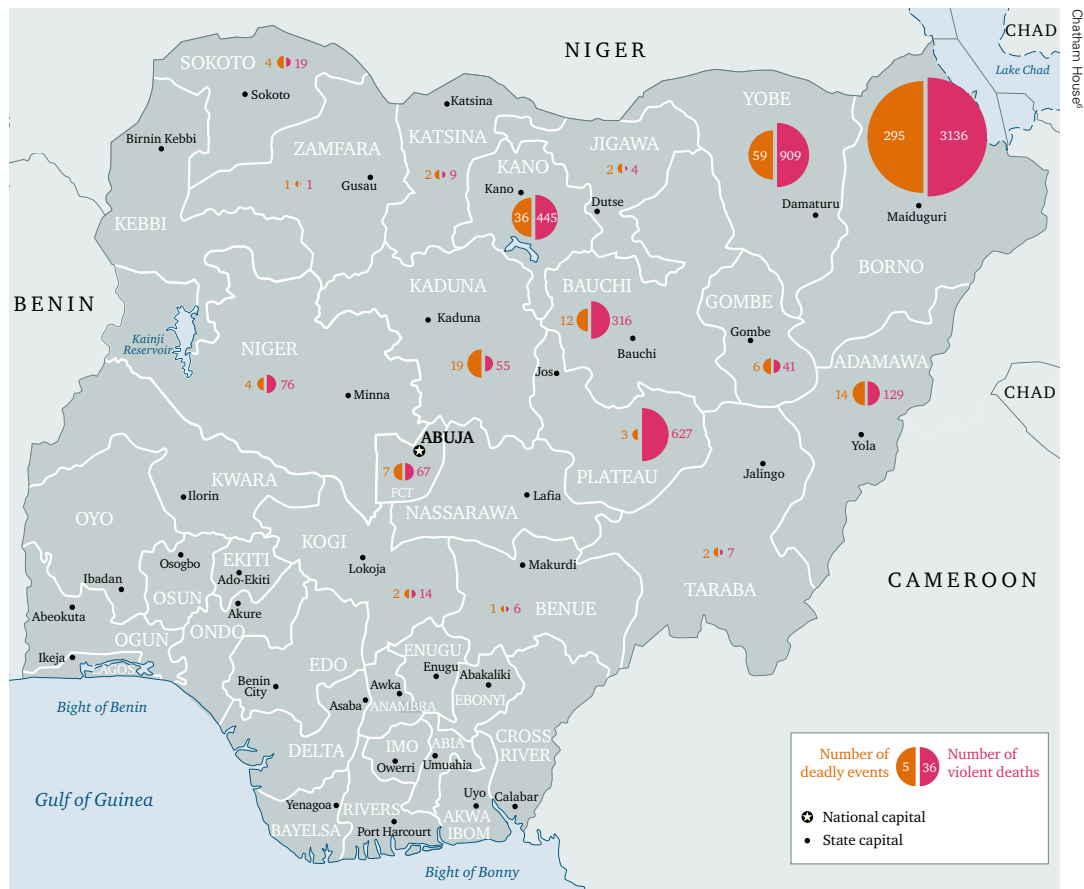


Figure 1: Boko Haram attacks and Violent Deaths (2006 - 2013)⁵

operations to kill and capture “scores” of Boko Haram insurgents since the movement was first brutally crushed in 2009.⁷ While this use of force has clearly enabled the JTF to pressure Boko Haram strongholds in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa and reduce the scope of its activity, it has also produced large-scale extrajudicial killings, mass arrests and intimidation of civilians, who are treated as insurgent sympathizers.

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Several factors have constrained the Nigerian security force response, most notably security sector corruption and mismanagement. The \$470 million Public Security Communications System (PSCS) project, initiated by the late President Umaru Yar’Adua’s administration and handled by the Chinese contractor ZTE Corporation for the installation of CCTV cameras in Abuja to detect or prevent crime, was poorly executed and has been abandoned. Nigerian troops are also not adequately resourced or equipped to counter the insurgency. A lack of investment in training, failure to maintain equipment and dwindling cooperation with Western forces has damaged Nigeria’s armed services. Unlike Nigerian

peacekeepers in the 1990s, who were effective in curbing ethnic bloodshed in Sierra Leone and Liberia, those in Mali in 2013 lacked the equipment and training needed to be of much help against al-Qaeda-linked forces. A recent report by Chatham House points out that soldiers in the northeast are suffering from malfunctioning equipment, low morale, desertions, and mutinies. Despite a large increase in government spending on the army from a security budget totaling almost \$5.8 billion, little of it has found its way to the front lines. Four hundred-eighty Nigerian soldiers were alleged to have fled to Cameroon in August 2014, when they were confronted with superior weapons in the hands of Boko Haram insurgents. In June 2014, ten generals and five other senior security staff were reportedly court martialed for arming and providing intelligence to the group, with 12 of them sentenced to death in September 2014.

Civilians/Local Peoples

In response to escalated attacks, “Civilian JTFs,” or *Yan Gora* (“those who hold the cane”) comprising local militia, have also been formed by local communities in the areas affected by and under siege of the insurgency. Since June 2013, they have supported operations in Maiduguri and also serve as a source of intelligence and a proxy force to avoid direct confrontation with the sect.

Armed with machetes, axes, bows and arrows, clubs, swords and daggers, these “Civilian JTFs” (CJTF) usually invade the homes of known and suspected Boko Haram members, hacking them to death or manhandling and then handing them over to the military.

With their assistance, the security situation around Maiduguri has improved significantly.

Their success in helping to drive many insurgents out of Maiduguri and largely stopping Boko Haram killings and bombings in the city is said to be at the cost of a proliferation of human rights violations.

Political, Socio-Economic, and Diplomatic Response

Since 2012, Nigeria has tried to address the Boko Haram challenge on multiple fronts, though these efforts have so far met with little success. The first effort was an increase in the defense budget from N396.5 billion (\$2.56 billion) in 2012 to N968.127 billion (\$5.69 billion) in 2014. The justification for much of this increase was to combat Boko Haram. In September 2014, the National Assembly approved a \$1bn external loan for the Federal Government to upgrade the equipment, training and logistics of the Armed Forces and security services in order to enable them to confront the insurgents more forcefully. Other measures include strengthening anti-terrorism legislation, boosting the capacities of the military and other security agencies, exploring dialogue with the insurgents, declaring a state of emergency in the Northeast and launching military offensives against the group.

Political negotiations with Boko Haram have largely been unsuccessful despite rapprochement overtures towards the Government in 2011 and 2012. A major factor has been the group's unreasonable demands, including, for example, calls for the Islamization of Nigeria and President Goodluck Jonathan's conversion to Islam.

The consensus among analysts is that the Government must attack the root causes of disaffection that push unemployed youths towards radicalization by Boko Haram, such as poverty and unemployment. A similar

approach was taken in the Niger Delta with the Niger Delta Amnesty Program that was used to douse the insurgency in that region.

Recent presentations from the National Security Adviser, Sambo Dasuki, suggest that a shift may be taking place towards recognizing this, with the unveiling of a "soft approach" in the form of the March 2014 "Countering Violent Extremism" program that outlined plans for capacity-building and economic development in the northeast, as well as for developing partnerships with faith groups and local stakeholders in a bid to co-opt these groups in a de-radicalization campaign. Not much has been heard in terms of its implementation.

International Response

The June 2014 Paris Conference deepened international support for Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign through an agreement by regional powers such as Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Benin to share intelligence with Nigeria. The United States, United Kingdom, France, and Israel, having already provided counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, logistical and capacity-building assistance in recent years, have increased support as part of the effort to find the Chibok girls. It remains unclear to what extent Nigerian officials are cooperating with foreign advisers and experts. The government has been criticized in domestic and international press reports for what has been widely perceived as a slow response to the abduction of the schoolgirls in April 2014, and to offers of international assistance in support of the investigation and possible rescue efforts. Nigeria's record of human rights abuses, combined with suspicions of malicious Western intentions, has limited the scope

of future Western counterinsurgency support beyond the Chibok search operation.

Colombia: A History of Violence

The deep divisions in Colombian politics that were to shape the country's modern history and development emerged shortly after independence from Spain in 1810, precipitating a battle between the two dominant political parties, the Conservatives (Partido Conservador Colombiano, or PCC) and the Liberals (Partido Liberal Colombiano, or PL).

This intense rivalry between the conservatives and the liberals continued throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries and came to a head in "La Violencia" (1948-1958), sparked by the assassination of a presidential hopeful, Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, a period during which an estimated 250,000 people lost their lives. This marked the beginning of the current violent internal armed conflict that has lasted for more than half a century.

Following bipartisan support of a bloodless military coup in 1953 and the signing of a power sharing agreement in 1957, the National Front system emerged. Liberals and conservatives agreed to alternate the presidency and apportion government positions.⁸ The agreement excluded other political parties and was elite-controlled, catalyzing a new phase of violence where the state perpetrated massive atrocities against peasant farmers. The country then entered into a long period of intense crime and mayhem, characterized by drug lords controlling large swaths of the state, and kidnapping and assassination on a scale unprecedented anywhere else in the world.

In the mid-1960s there was a blossoming of insurgencies with the emergence of multiple armed guerilla groups, most notably the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia

(Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC), and to a lesser degree, the National Liberation Army (ELN). This was a reaction to factors such as the exclusion of political movements outside of the National Front, the marginalization of the rural poor, the influence of communist and socialist ideologies, and the ineffectiveness of the judicial system. These groups took control of significant areas of the country and ultimately fused with much of the narco-trafficking community in widespread drug related violence that undermined the legitimacy of state power, while pursuing their original vision of political revolution.

These problems mutated in various ways, but persisted for three decades such that by 1999 Colombia was a country in deep trouble and on the precipice of being a failed state—its murder, kidnapping, and extortion rates were among the highest in the world and travel and tourism were unsafe. The resultant insecurity had pushed the Colombian economy into recession, and unemployment was moving above 15 percent. The "brain drain" and capital flight that followed took a heavy toll on the country's stability. On the military side, whole battalions of the Colombian army were being decimated in open combat. The military was demoralized and, despite some very talented leadership, headed in the wrong direction. Meanwhile, illegal right-wing armed groups were committing massacres and assassinations with the same intensity as FARC had done, and very powerful international trafficking organizations, such as the Medellin and Cali Cartels, penetrated and corrupted many government institutions and contributed to the overall climate of lawlessness.

Since then, however, the situation has dramatically improved. The major turning point in Colombia was "Plan Colombia" that began

during the presidency of Bill Clinton but was sustained and built upon by President George W. Bush, followed by the election of President Alvaro Uribe in 2002.

Uribe also brought a level of focus to the conflict that had never been previously seen, using his personality and energy to infuse a more intense and committed effort into the security forces as well. He also expanded the size of the armed forces and tightened their links with local communities, which contributed to the building of intelligence about the enemy to make attacks more precise and effective. By the end of his tenure in 2010, war-related civilian death rates were down by half. Colombia was beginning to enjoy an economic renaissance made possible by greater foreign investment and the return of many businessmen and other economic leaders who had fled the country.

Uribe's defense minister, Juan Manuel Santos, became Colombia's president in 2010. He continued many of his predecessor's policies, but sought to change the narrative at a political level. He began to emphasize possible peace talks with the FARC and a post-conflict vision for the country in general. This apparent softening of the political leadership's approach to the war brought criticism from Uribe, but did not lead to a diminution of the military effort by the Colombian Armed Forces under the leadership of defense minister Juan Carlos Pinzon, who continued to take the fight to the enemy. Precise, intelligence-based attacks against high-value targets, implemented largely by skilled commandos, have continued to be the hallmarks of the recent approach.

However the job is not yet done. Colombia is still violent, and there is no peace deal yet with either the FARC or ELN. Large parts of the country remain vipers' nests of

criminality and drug trafficking. Nonetheless, Colombia has several lessons for Nigeria in the management of insurgency.

Lessons from the Colombian Experience for Nigeria

Strong, effective leadership is essential to success in asymmetric conflict

The tipping point between muddling through and moving toward victory in Colombia was the election of leaders who translated bold vision into action since the beginning of Uribe's administration in 2002. There is little doubt that much of the progress in Colombia is the direct product of exceptional leadership from 2002 to 2013. The philosophy of having a clear, grand strategy, then holding people accountable down to the lowest level, has had a major impact in the current positive situation in Colombia.

Fixing the Army

Colombia has been able to transform its army from an ineffective, garrison-bound band into an aggressive force that has crippled the FARC and ELN. Reform of Colombia's army began during Andrés Pastrana's term as president (1998–2002) and accelerated during President Álvaro Uribe's tenure (2002–2010). In 1998, at the urging of U.S. officials, Pastrana replaced the top three leaders in the army with new generals who were trained at U.S. military schools and who had extensive combat experience at the battalion and brigade levels. This new trio then replaced subordinate commanders who lacked aggressiveness in the field.

Colombia also reorganized its army into a mobile and highly skilled professional component, and a conscript component formed

for local security. The professional component of the army established numerous air-mobile, ranger, mountain warfare, counter-drug, and Special Forces battalions. These units improved the army's overall effectiveness by specializing in specific tasks. To overcome Colombia's mountainous and forested terrain, the army also invested heavily in equipment such that the Colombian army currently operates the world's third-largest fleet of UH-60 Blackhawk assault helicopters.

The military, under its reform-minded leadership, is also adapting to new changes such as respect for human rights. It has consistently emerged in Colombian polls as one of the most respected institutions in the country.

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Abandon the conventional military-centric approach

There are no purely military solutions to pulling a nation or region out of the death spiral of violent extremism. As the Colombian experience demonstrates, there is a need to abandon the conventional military-centric approach as the one and only option for insurgency and other asymmetric conflicts. While not ignoring the importance of using military force, stability, political-economic-social development, rule of law, popular well-being, and sustainable peace all depend on effective and legitimate control of the national territory. Thus, a military-centric approach must be

balanced with a population-centric approach for maximum effect and legitimacy.

Wage war on corruption as a priority

In Colombia, frustration with inequality and corruption created the spark that set off larger anti-government movements such as the FARC. To be legitimate in the eyes of the people, governance has to be even-handed, relatively transparent, oriented toward human rights, and free of corruption.

Over the past few years, the apprehension, prosecution, and conviction of military members for human rights abuses and reporting "false guerrillas" in order to cover up extrajudicial killings also showed the public that officials would be held accountable.

Financing Counter-Insurgency

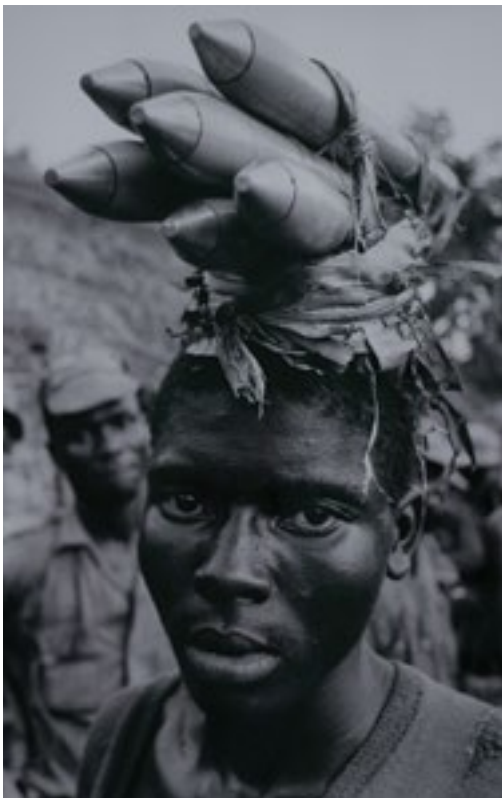
Colombia has no doubt shown the way forward with regard to the financing of counter-insurgencies. It successfully put the burden of expanding the state presence of security operations across the territory on the shoulders of the wealthiest members of society. This was accomplished by using special powers granted to the government during an emergency situation to establish a wealth tax (Impuesto al Patrimonio), popularly known as the War Tax. The first of such taxes was collected on a one-off basis in 2002 and yielded five percent of government revenue or one percent of GDP. A total of 420,000 taxpayers contributed in that year, of which 120,000 were high-income individuals.⁹ Started in 2004, the War Tax was extended through 2011, however payments will continue through 2014 in the form of a surtax on the tax due in 2011.

The proceeds were entirely earmarked for security and managed by an Ethics and Transparency Commission, including 12

members from the private sector. It is estimated that the tax raked in over \$800 million a year, allowing Colombia to modernize its military.

Conclusion

The Boko Haram insurgency has no doubt become Nigeria's albatross. Unless it is skillfully managed, it may become an indeterminate war and a threat to Nigeria's fragile democracy. Disparate as the two countries may seem to be on the surface, Nigeria has much to learn from Colombia in dealing with the Boko Haram insurgency. In a globalized world, surely lessons on governance and peace-building should find no barriers. **PRISM**



Soldier transporting munitions during the Nigerian-Biafran War

Notes

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